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Implementation of Economic and Social Council decision 2005/240

Report of the Secretary-General

1. In its decision 2005/240, the Economic and Social Council decided to request the Secretary-General to examine the causes for persistent delays in the availability of documentation for the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations, take measures to address the problem and submit a report to the Committee at its 2006 regular session. The present report has been prepared in compliance with that request.

Documentation

2. The documentation submitted to the Committee is typically comprised of:

(a) Reports prepared by the Secretariat to inform the Committee's substantive discussions covering a wide range of issues related to NGOs. Such reports may be prepared either in response to an express request (as in the case of the present report) or at the initiative of the Secretariat;

(b) Special reports prepared by NGOs at the request of the Committee, outside the regular quadrennial schedule. Non-governmental organizations are usually called upon to produce special reports in response to complaints brought against them by one or more Member States. There are no strict rules or technical guidelines governing the preparation of such reports. However, in its request for special reports, the Committee indicates the scope and nature of the information it requires from NGOs;

(c) Reports prepared by NGOs on their activities and submitted to the Committee every four years in compliance with Council resolution 1996/31. Quadrennial reports constitute the only formal monitoring mechanism by means of which the Committee may confirm that an organization is maintaining its original aims and orientation. Although relatively unstructured in format, quadrennial reports are subject to certain technical and editorial rules, and NGO submissions are

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not transmitted to the Committee until a detailed Secretariat review process has determined their compliance with the written guidelines setting out all such requirements;

(d) Questionnaires completed by NGOs applying for consultative status with the Council. The questionnaire has a highly structured format requiring short answers to approximately 21 open-ended questions, accompanied by a one-page summary of the most pertinent questionnaire items. As for quadrennial reports, the drafting and presentation of questionnaire responses are subject to specific guidelines and a rigorous and often lengthy pre-screening by the Secretariat to ensure that the relevant technical requirements have been met before transmission to the Committee.

3. The examination showed that the problem of delay was confined to NGO application questionnaires and quadrennial reports.

Findings

4. It has been determined that for every four applications screened by the Secretariat, only one is finalized and submitted to the Committee for its consideration. This is, in itself, a lengthy and painstaking exercise. For example, although the members of the Committee usually review and base their consideration on the applicant's questionnaire responses, the full application package submitted by an NGO seeking consultative status includes specified supporting material (official registration papers, publications, audited budget documents, etc.), that must be checked by the Secretariat for validity and internal consistency.

5. Applications or reports submitted with incomplete or inadequate documentation or responses are returned with suggestions for revision and this begins an ongoing dialogue between the reviewing officer and the NGO. On average, this exchange will consist of at least two written exchanges for each application (approximately three or four in the case of quadrennial reports), often augmented by extensive telephone and personal consultations.

6. Nevertheless, it is an important part of the Secretariat's mandate to assist NGOs in bringing their applications into line with the Committee's criteria as long as they remain actively involved, no matter how lengthy the process may prove to be. In the light of the directive contained in Council resolution 1996/31, the Secretariat goes to great lengths to make every allowance for the special circumstances of organizations constrained by poor communications infrastructure and/or linguistic difficulties.

7. The success of the concerted effort on the part of the Secretariat to redress the geographical imbalance of NGO representation in the Council is evidenced by the fact that approximately one half of the organizations recommended for consultative status by the Committee at its last three sessions were from developing countries and countries with economies in transition.

Measures taken to address the problem

8. Measures taken include:

(a) At its 2000 session, the Committee established an informal working group on NGOs, which meets regularly throughout the year to discuss a wide range of technical issues in order to facilitate the smooth functioning of the Committee;

(b) Guidelines for the Committee's new application form have been prepared and clear instructions provided;

(c) The working group has updated the guidelines for NGO quadrennial reports to reflect the Committee's new approach to their review and suggest what information would be most useful for such a review;

(d) The quadrennial guidelines are being further elaborated not only to define how organizations should describe their activities but more importantly to reflect specific areas of substantive concern; they set out the Committee's expectations regarding the activities that contribute to both the development concerns of the Council and the overall goals and objectives of the global community.